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Berten, John

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# Failed Indicatorisation: Defining, Comparing and Quantifying Social Policy in the ILO's *International Survey of Social Services* of the Interwar Period

John Berten\*

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**Abstract:** »Gescheiterte Indikatorisierung: Definition, Vergleich und Quantifizierung von Sozialpolitik durch den International Survey of Social Services der Internationalen Arbeitsorganisation in der Zwischenkriegszeit«. Despite social policy being one of the most quantified policy fields today, there is no singular indicator or set of indicators of social policy quality or performance on the global level that is universally accepted and influential, comparable to GDP in the economy. The article analyses and explains the unsuccessful indicatorisation in the ILO's International Survey of Social Services of the interwar years. During this first elaborate study of social policies worldwide by an international organisation, difficult issues of defining, comparing, and quantifying social policy had to be solved for the first time. Theoretically, a sociology of knowledge approach on indicatorisation is utilised that highlights how social policy was questioned and evaluated. This illustrates the demanding work of comparing including a politicized knowledge production, identifying conditions and hindrances of defining and quantifying the 'social'. It is observed that different interests of participants, epistemic cultures, and practices, as well as bureaucratic procedures resulted in the mere inclusion of a provisional indicator of cost and little quantified data in the final Survey. Empirically, the article relies on an in-depth analysis of historical ILO documents.

**Keywords:** Social policy, sociology of quantification, indicators, comparison, knowledge politics, international bureaucracies, International Labour Organization.

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## 1. Introduction

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Undisputedly, social policy is one of the most quantified policy fields, today unimaginable without numbers (Espeland and Stevens 2008, 406). Identifying and counting the population enabled its governing in the first place, as already postulated by Foucault (2009, 99-104), and thus statistics fulfilled vital func-

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\* John Berten, Bremen International Graduate School of Social Sciences & Faculty of Sociology, Bielefeld University, Universitätsstraße 25, 33615 Bielefeld, Germany; john.berten@uni-bielefeld.de.

tions for information-hungry administrations and the military alike (Hacking 1990). Statistical innovations from ambitious social reformers such as the poverty studies by Booth or Rowntree in the late 19th century framed social policy from the beginning (Spicker 1990). The success of social policies in today's performance management and evaluation culture is also strongly tied to the availability and quality of numerical inscriptions (Power 2004). Administering large social policy schemes relies on numbers to achieve targeting the right beneficiaries or identify consequences of implemented policies (Devereux et al. 2017), a claim also commonplace in a since recently burgeoning literature of international organisations on social policy in development contexts (IOs; e.g., World Bank 2012).

Although today, numbers have spread to the global promotion of social justice and moral concerns (Kelley and Simmons 2015), with social issues and development being strongly permeated by indicators (Goodwin 2017), there is no singular indicator or index (or set of indicators) of social policy, social security or social protection quality or performance on the global level that is universally accepted, comparable to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the economy or the Human Development Index (HDI). GDP has fundamentally influenced the profession of economics in general (Fioramonti 2013) and has also been a cornerstone of the emergence of development politics. It has achieved this hegemony, despite much criticism from inside the economic field itself, e.g., regarding its application towards subsistence-based economies in the global South by the economist Colin Clarke (Speich 2011).

During the same time period as the economist Kuznets developed the modern concept of GDP – during the 1930s –, the International Labour Organization (ILO) was involved in the first international comparative observation of social policies: the *International Survey of Social Services* (published in a first edition in 1933 and a second edition, divided into two volumes, in 1936; see ILO 1933a; 1936a; 1936b).<sup>1</sup> Although not all countries of the world were assessed in the *Survey*, since neither ILO membership was global, nor did all member states of the ILO participate, the study gathered an impressive and at that time unprecedented amount of participant countries and schemes. Despite discussing several options of indicators of social policy during its production process, the final publication does not contain any, and little quantified data overall.

Why did the *Survey* not include any indicators, and, additionally, can this give us indications of why there is still no commonly accepted and universal indicator of social policy, social security, or social protection quality or per-

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<sup>1</sup> As will be detailed later, 'social services' refers here to a variety of social programmes that include social insurance and social assistance measures, housing, family allowance, and holidays with pay. Terminological obscurity is not to be 'solved' by this research, but an important empirical insight, same as the (temporary) fixing of boundaries.

formance on the global level?<sup>2</sup> Social security – as one of the core institutions of social policy and the welfare state – today fields a range of indicators, many developed and used by IOs, but these do not relate to an overall appreciation of its quality or performance, but merely to single dimensions, addressing input, process, output, outcome or impact (EC 2017), or to sub-types of social security (see, e.g., for pensions Peeters et al. 2014), and many are qualitative in nature (ILO 2013a).

Instead of a transcendent perspective of observation uncovering general conditions of indicator production, the article follows the knowledge production process of the *Survey* itself to reconstruct settlements as well as contested issues on the level of social policy knowledge. ‘Indicatorisation’ is a demanding procedure, even more so in a transnational context. In epistemic terms, it relies on categorising, comparing and quantifying, in a case that misses clear, seemingly ‘fixed’ boundaries between issues. In political terms, it touches upon various contested issues, bringing together multiple participants with varying interests and epistemic cultures in an international bureaucracy characterised by complex organisational procedures. The article shows how, because of these difficulties in epistemic, political and organisational terms, the final *Survey* merely includes what can be termed a provisional, incomplete indicator of cost of social policies, but nonetheless has laid the foundation for the further quantification of social policy worldwide and even contains the roots of the later post-WWII social security framework.

Theoretically, the article draws on a sociology of knowledge framework, infused by an understanding of the fundamentally political nature of bureaucratic politics. Newer studies of knowledge in politics have illustrated the importance of examining instruments of world-making – observation and interaction – that make possible certain ways of conceiving and dealing with the world, in the form of the ‘ontic furniture’ of politics (Power 2004, 766), epistemic infrastructure (Bueger 2015), or ‘infrapolitics’ (Voß and Freeman 2016, 5-6). Empirically, the article relies on an in-depth analysis of historical documents obtained at the ILO archives as well as scanned ILO documents publicly available online.<sup>3</sup> The empirical material has been examined using a Grounded Theory-based

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<sup>2</sup> As somewhat of an exception, see the ADB’s Social Protection Index, yet note how it did not (yet) diffuse to other regions of the world than Asia and has been criticised for its inherent reductionism and the exclusion of normative aspects such as social rights and solidarity (ADB 2013; Priwitzer 2009). Another recent example of an ‘overarching’ indicator, though not from an IO, is the Social Protection Floor Index, geared towards measuring progress towards the ILO project of ‘social protection floors’ (Bierbaum et al. 2017) and as such clearly related to a specific function.

<sup>3</sup> The research is part of a PhD project interested in the development of social security statistics, indicators, and other numerical tools of IOs. I am especially grateful to the International Labour Organization, for having me granted access to their archival collections and thus making this research possible.

research design attentive to identifying debates and contentious issues on definition, classification, and comparison.<sup>4</sup>

After a short descriptive account of the knowledge activities regarding social policy by the ILO in the interwar period (2), the article delves into prerequisites and obstacles of indicatorisation (3). In the empirical section of the article, it is analysed – all in relation to potentially controversial debates – how comparison per se became questioned and politicised (4.1), and how the *Survey* produced equivalence, i.e., defined the field of social services (4.2), observed difference, i.e., discussed criteria of comparison (4.3), but ultimately included little quantification, merely a provisional indicator of cost (4.4).

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## 2. The International Labour Organization of the Interwar Period: Standard-Setting in Law and Knowledge

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Founded as an organisation dedicated to establishing international regulation to protect workers, the ILO has a tripartite structure: at the International Labour Conference, as well as its Governing Body (GB), it includes not only governmental, but also employers' and workers' representatives. It is also one of the oldest IOs still in existence and has outlived the League of Nations which has been established at the same time.

Even though the ILO was primarily tasked with improving labour legislation, and while the 'globalisation of social policy' (Deacon 2007) remains fragmented, with no IO being predominantly responsible for social policy, the organisation has early on influenced social policies worldwide through its standard-setting activities as well as its knowledge work (see the contributions in Kott and Droux 2013, and Conrad 2006). During the interwar period, the ILO implemented 13 conventions covering diverse social security policies, although these were rarely signed (Kott 2010). In addition, the ILO published numerous studies on social policy, conducted expert conferences, and answered requests for information, becoming an "international point of reference for research and expertise (...)" (Rodgers et al. 2009, 148).<sup>5</sup> Thereby, its functions

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<sup>4</sup> The approach is similar to Merry's (2011, 85) project of an 'ethnography of indicators', meaning "examining the history of the creation of an indicator and its underlying theory, observing expert group meetings and international discussions where the terms of the indicator are debated and defined, (...) observing data-collection processes", however without actual participation, and instead relying on document analysis alone. Luckily, the ILO has from its inception implemented a stringent archival policy.

<sup>5</sup> Requests for information for the Social Insurance Section alone had skyrocketed from 42 in 1924 to 140 in 1930. Requests for information included advice on bills, technical advice on schemes, reports for conferences, technical studies, and collaboration (ILO 1931a, 130). A huge part of requests focused on social security; from almost 1000 requests overall in 1931,

as diplomatic body, clearing house, intermediary between nations, and ‘social library’ (Kott 2010) might have had more impact than a unilateral focus on its traditional standard-setting activities might assert.

With the *International Survey of Social Services* the outlook of the organisation on social policies was broadened. The *Survey* itself did not aim at producing a universal, transnational indicator of social service quality or performance, even though it discussed options of indicators. It nonetheless impacted the possibilities of indicators as well as the general development of social policies. First, because the *Survey* was an initial step towards developing a global knowledge infrastructure on social security, it has been the foundation for later comparative studies. In the late 1940s, the ILO built on the *Survey* with the influential, multi-volume *Cost of Social Security* (ILO 1947, 82; ISSA 1955, 9), succeeded in 1999 by the *Social Security Inquiry* (ILO 2005), which is the foundation for the new *World Social Protection Database* (ILO 2017). Thereby, it had path-dependent ramifications for how social policies were subsequently defined and viewed. Second, at the time of its production, there was no overarching concept of social policies yet (such as ‘social security’), and welfare states were not yet widespread in Europe and beyond. Therefore, the *Survey*’s producers had to unite on common trajectories and define the content of the ‘social’.<sup>6</sup> They had to consider difficult questions for the first time: what – if anything – should be compared, and how? What was conceived as common between social schemes of countries with widely differing traditions of social policy that encountered and perceived different social problems and were at varying stages of economic development (similarly Yeates 2001, 169)?

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### 3. Analysing Indicatorisation in Global Social Policy

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According to research of international bureaucracies, IOs derive much of their authority in global politics from their expertise (Littoz-Monnet 2017; Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 20-29). We know, however, more about functions and consequences of this ‘politics by knowledge’ and less about how it is generated in the first place (Voß and Freeman 2016; but see, e.g., Bueger 2015). I argue that material and/ or epistemic practices, processes and technologies shape or even actively invent political phenomena. It is necessary to open up the ‘black box’ of an instrument of knowledge and its production process, resulting in a politics of bureaucratic and expert knowledge production, to analyse how di-

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120 were related to social insurance. That was the second most requested topic that year after conditions of work (hours of labour and wages; ILO 1932, 103).

<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that the ‘social’ does not have a fixed meaning, still, and is much more contested than, e.g., the ‘economic’ or the ‘political’ (see e.g., Leisering 2003, 177).

verging interpretations in contested debates decide upon the shape of an instrument, which then again functions as a ‘lens’ in observations.

Indicators are a variant of quantification that has especially in recent decades proliferated in global discourses (Davis et al. 2012). Just like quantification in general, indicators make visible phenomena through measurement, simplifying information and reducing complexity (Heintz 2012, 12). In global politics, they represent and evaluate the past or projected performance of actors by reference to standards (Davis et al. 2012, 6). While most critical research focuses on the consumption of numbers, such as its use as a powerful governing and management device (Hansen and Porter 2012), there are recent advances in the field that deliver insights into its production as well (Huelss 2017).

Producing numbers requires abstracting from meanings and ignoring differences, thereby imagining categories that represent ‘sameness’, and inventing new relations (Heintz 2010). The sociology and economy of conventions has alluded to the importance of ‘making equivalent’, as the basis of any (e)valuation between units (Thévenot 2016, 97). Espeland and Stevens’ (1998) described ‘commensuration’ as the process of comparing different entities according to a common metric. However, putting units inside a category is neither necessarily the same as making included units (entirely) equal, nor does commensuration always rely on common metrics (Heintz 2010, 164). According to Heintz (2016, 316), the basal process underlying quantification is comparing – an epistemic practice in its own right, consisting of, first, categorical unification, i.e., viewing units as similar, while second, observing (gradual) difference, in relation to a criterion of comparison. As a result, new relationships of meaning between units are produced that are being viewed as similar in one or many respects, but also as different in at least one other dimension. Quantifying units adds a common metric, resulting in a particular case of comparison.

The question of what is comparable (and what not) cannot be answered by looking at the categories themselves (e.g., their ‘nature’), but has social and political reasons (Heintz 2010, 164). On what grounds can we analyse the knowledge production process then?

Several authors point to the fundamental role of politics (see also [Diaz-Bone 2019](#) and [Thévenot 2019](#), in this issue). “Whether or not something is made a datum is the result of scientific or political struggles.” (Thévenot 2016, 99). Numbers do not passively record and measure the social, but are products of interpretation and contingent methodological choices that can be investigated in their own right (Starr 1987, 48-52). Classifying and comparing

exhibit traces of social conflicts, social investments and collective efforts to implement a representation of a collective as a (socially recognised and officially secured category in classifications. ([Diaz-Bone 2017](#), 242)

In regards to social policy, these representations also relate to other contested issues, such as social problem definitions, solutions to these problems, the roles of the state, employees and employers.

Since comparisons can be criticised and contested, they involve work. Generally, legitimacy of a framework of comparison is attained if a construction seems self-evident and if it refers to others that already field high legitimacy (Espeland and Stevens 2008, 403-8). Often, categorising relies on knowledge conventions, which form the principles or logics that guide interpretation as well as (e)valuation (Diaz-Bone 2017, 239).

However, despite the importance of political struggles, knowledge production in international bureaucracies is subject to a variety of influencing factors, dictated by epistemic cultures, as well as the product of organisational processes. Experts and epistemic communities share common ways of approaching problems and devising solutions, and complex organisations such as the ILO develop specific procedures to structure decision-making.

To answer its research question, the article reconstructs how social policy has been observed and evaluated and how schemes have been compared, following the production process of transnational knowledge. Thereby, it aims to identify conditions and hindrances of developing common ground and – ultimately – the construction of indicators. Before even alternatives of indicators are fielded against existing ones, observing and analysing classification, comparison, and quantification results in an investigation of the principles that manage relations between categories in social policy at the same time as it leads to an appreciation of the politics of expert knowledge production in IOs, mediated by bureaucratic and expert cultures and instruments of observation.

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#### 4. Defining, Comparing, and Quantifying Social Policy: Observing the International Survey of Social Services

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##### 4.1 To Compare, or Not to Compare

The following analysis will regularly refer to the production process of the Survey, which is reproduced in Table 1, including the respective decision of the Governing Body of the ILO.

Since comparing is a basic social (and psychological) process and will always only partly be reflected upon, the essential necessity of comparing for the production of the *Survey* has not found its way into debates itself. The aspects that were contested tell us, however, about the diverging positions regarding comparison, related to organisational roles, discursive contexts, and epistemic cultures.

First, doubts regarding the British proposal to study ‘social charges’ (see Table 1) were raised based on practical grounds. The Director criticised the



high complexity of a complete comparison between social charges, resulting in too much of a burden for the organisation that would be in need of much more manpower, if it was to undertake the study (ILO 1926a, 69-70; ILO 1926b, 157). Related, second, was general criticism based on data availability or quality, with even official statistics from industrialised countries having been incomplete or inexact. The Correspondence Committee, asked to provide a first evaluation of the planned study, saw hindrances especially in diverging national economic developments and contexts, including different currencies, and thus proposed that the Office should reduce errors of methods first, producing separate reports by country and industry, before thinking about possibilities of further comparison (ILO 1926c, 411-5).

**Table 1:** The Production Process of the *International Survey of Social Services*, 1926-1936

Participant	Date/period	Intervention	Governing Body decision
British government, at the 30th Meeting of the Governing Body	1926	Proposal to study cost of social services in chief industrial countries (detailed in a second letter at the 31st Meeting of the Governing Body)	Despite ILO Director's doubts regarding complexity, Correspondence Committee was convened to provide advice on planned study
Correspondence Committee on Social Insurance	1926	Approved of <i>Survey</i> , but pointed to dangers of misuse; worried about unilateral cost-based statistics, which left out 'unmeasurable' productive benefits	Criticised 'philosophical' report; founded 'Committee on Social Charges' instead (consisting of Governing Body representatives and country experts)
Office	1926 - 1930	Produced preliminary study of selected countries	Not deemed publication-worthy; work should continue
Committee on Social Charges	1929 - 1937	Debated issues around categories and (criteria of) comparison, throughout production of the <i>Survey</i>	Convened 9 times
Office	1930 - 1936	Produced actual <i>Survey</i> studies (information sent back to governments for verification and completion, returned to Office); decided on concrete standardisation of information	Approved study for publication in 1933 (first edition, 24 countries) and 1936 (second edition, two volumes of 19 countries each): containing 3-year-old information on population statistics, social insurance, social assistance, housing, family allowances, and holidays with pay

Source: Own Compilation.

Some Governing Body (GB) members equally saw different costs of production and revenues as a grave hindrance to comparison, referring to the idiosyn-

cracy of countries, although these statements were linked with a more political, third argument: the danger of illegitimate conclusions. Already the Correspondence Committee, being asked to provide an opinion on the British proposal of a study of social services, urged the Office to be mindful of the relative character of comparison results and to inform about the dangers involved in drawing absolute conclusions from these (ILO 1926c, 411-5). The fear of possible politicisation was especially brought forth by the workers' group and other more social legislation-friendly members in the GB who not only warned that comparisons could undermine the ILO's claim of being a neutral mediator for its constituents, by forcing the organisation to state its position on costs of social services, but also claimed that observations could be misleading (ILO 1926d). As an example of a misunderstanding generated by a simplified cost-based comparison, they cited the case of countries with large families. These would inherently face greater social charges which would of course not justify a worse rating than countries with smaller families (ILO 1926c, 337-9).

The controversy can be explained by the discursive context, impacting how participating actors conceived of others' intentions. The *Survey* fell into a time of scepticism regarding social legislation (Kott 2010). This aroused suspicions that the proposal for the *Survey* was not that innocent at all. Dominant discourses around a negative conception of social policies as a burden on production and as cost to be reduced, transformed comparing per se into a political issue. This also explains the Correspondence Committee's insistence on positive benefits of social policies, arguing in its report that these cannot be reduced to a mere cost, but involve a 'productive' dimension, such as ensuring social stability, improving health, and securing earning capacity. The discursive context mediates how and when institutional knowledge production attempts are initiated and also impacts how they transform, although not in an inevitable way. The timing of the British proposal and its thematic focus can be explained by these broader discourses around the reduction of public costs and questions of international economic competition (hence the term 'social charges' that is frequently utilised instead of 'cost' and especially denotes its role in the costs of production).

Proponents of comparison in the GB on the other hand raised the concern that simply not doing it would not only push the *Survey* away from the initial proposal, but also governments

had the right to know what other countries were doing in the same sphere, so as to be sure that the real object of the Treaty, which was to improve the lot of the workers, was being honestly carried out. (ILO 1926c, 339)

Comparisons were 'made anyway', but the ILO could at least provide high quality data. This argument, stressing mission and responsibility of the ILO to its constituents (including workers), won over even workers' representatives. The doubts raised for instance by the Correspondence Committee regarding illegitimate conclusions thereby receded into the background.

Analysis of the opposition to, as well as proponents of comparison also shows the importance of keeping in mind the roles that participating actors in the process of knowledge production play, some of which at the same time constitute representatives of participating agencies (e.g., members of participating governments), decision-makers in the organisation (e.g., members of the ILO's GB), as well as the public that the *Survey* is directed at. This goes along with (potentially) differing interests (even within subjects), as well as different approaches and stances. The Director's concerns regarding practicability are directly explainable by his role in the organisation, as head of the Office. The Office primarily fulfils administrative duties and abstains from officially voicing a position, but is nonetheless, in conducting the bulk of the actual work, left to deal with unresolved issues and thereby crucially involved in the final outcome. The GB members are at the same time decision-makers in an ILO capacity, deciding upon the further shape of the production process, as well as representatives of government agencies, workers' and employers' organisations, potentially themselves objects and addressees of the *Survey*, and thus in need of alternating between different roles. They were however aware of the essentially political function of cost comparison, and hid their respective political agendas related to whom they represented behind arguments of method, value, and (unintended) effect of comparison.

Notwithstanding, the final *Survey* was not integrated by an indicator and no comparative tables between countries were presented. The chapters, differentiated by country, list population data, describe social services, and present cost statistics, all according to a unified framework but not a shared metric, so observers would have to relate elements to each other themselves. The next sections will reveal that unsolved debates about what and how to compare were responsible.

## 4.2 What to Compare: Producing Equivalence

The *Survey* was the first international comparative knowledge production exercise of social policies in the ILO. It could not draw upon existing experiences. Comparative endeavours, before, were entirely restricted to single sub-types of social policy, such as sickness insurance, and were prepared for specific functions, such as International Labour Conferences (ILO 1926a, 70). The *Survey*, for the first time, entailed the need to delimit the field of social policies, answering questions such as what constituted the similarity between schemes with a social scope. The most overarching problem that the Office, the GB, and the two Committees dealt with was the object of the *Survey*, in the final publication labelled 'social services', related to two main issues: general problems of definition and demarcation, and the inclusion of social assistance apart from social insurance.

#### 4.2.1 Defining 'Social Services'

Social policies in the interwar years were missing an overarching, integrating conceptual category. For a survey, it is in principle not necessary to develop a strong, unifying concept of the included policies; an ordering device such as a simple list would suffice. The British proposal merely listed 'social services' of interest, based on certain risks (see Table 1). However, to make a comparison on the grounds of a standard criterion plausible, such as through a (quantified) indicator, the compared units would have to be conceived as sharing common characteristics. This involves work whose amount does not lie in the compared issue itself, such as its 'nature', but is an outcome of a social construction. In the case of collective actors and contested issues, success or failure depends on which claims stressing similarity or dissimilarity prevail over others.

The Correspondence Committee's report followed a risk-based definition of social services, after differentiating these between compensatory, rehabilitative, and mitigating functions. Risks were classified by origin – physical (accidents, sickness, maternity, invalidity, old age, and death) and economic (unemployment) (ILO 1926c, 410-1).<sup>7</sup> This was widely in line with the British proposal and existing knowledge conventions, such as the ILO's 'Series M' on social insurance which documented intricacies of specific types of schemes (e.g., ILO 1925). More fundamental was to determine that 'social services' should protect the 'worker' (which was at times equated with being 'beneficial for the wider population'). This was felt necessary to exclude public services in general, such as the postal service. Despite the GB's criticism of the Committee's report, this definition was upheld even until the final publication (ILO 1926c, 413; ILO 1929a, 2).

Although somewhat vague and interpretation-dependent, the definition decided a later debate on the inclusion of family allowances paid by employers, and impacted one on paid holidays. Despite that family responsibilities were not deemed coverable by compulsory insurance but constituted individual and voluntary matters, the Committee on Social Charges argued from the empirical standpoint that members of a worker's family were covered by these, too, and thus family allowances should be included (ILO 1926c, 414-5). In the case of paid holidays on the other hand, we observe that classifiers referred to different levels to bolster their claims (Diaz-Bone 2017, 241). Some critics in the GB considered these part of wages, not social charges, arguing from the perspective of employers and costs of production. Others, on similar grounds, voted for their inclusion, by referring to social assistance which could also be explained

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<sup>7</sup> Counting unemployment as an economic risk and all others as 'physical', i.e., not economic (since they cannot be both), the experts somewhat relieved the economy of its responsibility. Viewing unemployment at least partly as a structural issue and not as an individual's fault alone has also been a rather recent accomplishment (Whiteside 2015).

as part of wages, as supplementary wage, or substitute, linking paid holidays to their economic function for the individual. Again others occupied a legal standpoint, by making their inclusion dependent from countries' specific social legislation and, ergo, uniqueness. Pragmatism won: it was decided to put family allowances and paid holidays into different sections to avoid confusion – the issue was termed 'theoretical', since at that point, comparison through a common criterion was not envisaged any longer, anyway. It was a tight vote however, criticised because it could be misconstrued as being the official ILO position (ILO 1931b, 284-90).

Less an object of debate, but equally consequential, was the actual scope of the study. The British proposal envisaged a focus on chief industrialised countries, interested in practical and politically usable knowledge (ILO 1926b, 202-3). The specific selection of countries was left to the Office which decided on the grounds of social policy tradition, as well as probable availability of data (ILO 1933a; ILO 1937, 2). The first criterion was obviously chosen because it suggests comparability, i.e., sameness. At the same time, this incorporated a bias towards Europe, in addition to some other countries that would later be called 'Western', but can also be explained by the fact that the world of industrialised countries of the 1920s/ 1930s that had social policy legislation in place almost equalled Europe and North-America, with some exceptions. The argument of data availability is more pragmatic in essence, but inevitable, since countries included needed to have the administrative capacity to measure their policies.

Apparently, neither were the guidelines entirely sufficient, nor could a simple list of services do the endeavour justice, so the Office was given wide leeway to decide on actual inclusion of schemes, as well as their standardisation. Conforming national peculiarities to a standard definition was necessary, since terminologies and actual schemes differed by country and deviated from the ideal types imagined (ILO 1929a, 2-3). The process, however, remains almost entirely impenetrable, since there is no documentation of this work by the Office. We can assert that the Office had a decade of standard-setting experience in social policy knowledge, drawing upon a frame that informed how to delimit the field of social policy, not treading on new ground entirely. Series 'M', on social insurance, can be seen as a conceptual toolbox that delivered standard categories and classifications for 'making things similar'.

#### 4.2.2 Social Insurance vs. Social Assistance

A second problem of classification was related to the continuing tension between the two primary ways of delivering social services – either via social

insurance or via social assistance (or ‘relief’).<sup>8</sup> Although this tension seldom reached open conflict, different protagonists inside the Bismarckian-oriented ILO, such as Great Britain, Switzerland, and Scandinavian countries, preferred social assistance-type measures, for different reasons such as their welfare traditions (Rodgers et al. 2009, 145).

Again, the arguments refer to different levels of classification. Some proponents, such as the Correspondence Committee and members of the Committee on Social Charges argued that exclusion of social assistance would not show the real costs of covering risks, with some countries choosing to cover risks in different ways, paying benefits out of the general taxes, which sometimes accounted for huge amounts of public expenditure. In many countries social assistance and insurance would also coexist, as necessary complement or stepping in when the latter did not apply. Both arguments rely on norms of thoroughness. Others followed a functional logic, arguing that social assistance covered risks just the same as insurance. Especially the Office followed a pragmatic rationale, noting how social assistance statistics were often only of limited value, since not being under state jurisdiction, not following the same administrative rigour and reporting standards as social insurance or because of unclear conditions of payment, if data was existent at all (sometimes, statistics of social assistance schemes had to be collected anew). Others, such as the Correspondence Committee, argued against social assistance, based on the worker criterion which many social assistance benefits did not conform to. This marginalised social assistance, by making social insurance characteristics a guiding criterion for its inclusion, sufficing only when it was directed to the ‘worker’ and/or his family (ILO 1926c, 413; ILO 1929a, 8; ILO 1929b, 329, 365-6).<sup>9</sup>

Since the Committee on Social Charges could not come to a conclusion, an Office intervention in the form of a study of the empirical facts finally led to the decision to treat the problem pragmatically, leaving it to governments’

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<sup>8</sup> Actually, it is common to differentiate between social assistance, which is often viewed as conferring a right to the individual, and relief which resembles charity and is not rights-based (see, e.g., Seekings 2007, 536). However, the ILO context with its multiple languages and translations makes analyses based on these finer divisions quite difficult. Instead of linking one or the other concept to rights, this article proceeds by observing when and how a rights-linkage is made in actual publications, irrespective of whether ‘social assistance’ or ‘relief’ is the term spoken of.

<sup>9</sup> Social assistance services were, and still are, often not institutionalised on the national level, but are organised on the federal and local level. Still in the 1990s, data availability led to problems for doing comparative research on social assistance (Eardley et al. 1996, 110). It is not natural per se, that social services are aggregated on the national level. Partly, this has thus to be analysed as an artefact, generated by knowledge infrastructures such as the Survey, whose consequences await further study. It produces new relations of meaning, to take the nation state as the natural level of analysis in knowledge production irrespective of social policies’ actual level of implementation.

judgements, adding that definitions ‘should not be interpreted too rigidly’ (ILO 1931a, 125-6). This pragmatic stance, leaving the publication with somewhat varying scope and precision, undermined an otherwise surprising fact: that, following a recommendation from the Correspondence Committee’s report, only those social assistance services should be included in the *Survey* which “guarantee a right to the beneficiary in virtue of legislation, or of a contract or rule” (ILO 1926c, 410; ILO 1933a, viii). Statements of influential scholars in social policy that social assistance, based on means-testing, does not embrace or consider social citizenship rights (see, e.g., Korpi 1989, or Esping-Andersen 1990, 22, 48), are thus empirically contradicted: at least in transnational knowledge generation, social assistance, and rights were coupled already before WWII. In effect, this rule establishes a formal preference for specific types of social assistance. Herewith, we can also add to Kaufmann’s (2015, 177) argument of the internationalisation of the welfare state after WWII which links social transfers to rights, by pointing to the partial realisation of this idea already through the pre-WWII *Survey*. Of course, its realisation is at the same time constrained in two ways, by specifying that social assistance included should target workers instead of the whole population (sometimes equating the first with the latter), as well as by effectively leaving the decision of in- or exclusion of social assistance policies to the countries themselves.

Overall, the subordination of social assistance under criteria fitting social insurance is not surprising per se, given the ILO’s tradition of labour legislation. It shows the impact of powerful existing conventions of knowledge. The minority groups inside the ILO could not fully establish their preference of social assistance in the organisation. Only recently, social assistance has finally been acknowledged fully, by linking it to the ‘social protection floors’ campaign that aims at implementing social assistance-type ‘social cash transfers’ in the global South (Gliszczynski and Leisering 2016).

However, the lack of a distinct unifying concept of social services integrating both forms of providing welfare did not facilitate the grounds for comparison through a common indicator.

#### 4.2.3 A Stepping Stone towards Social Security?

The *Survey* was in need of much more work on boundary-making than first envisaged. The absolute need for strict rules of in- and exclusion arose because of epistemic cultures that valued exactitude, methodically sound standards, and comprehensiveness, and connected the possibility of comparison via an indicator with the need to clearly define the object of the *Survey*. However, some concerns could not be overcome. Questions of what constituted part of the social and what part of the economic sphere (wages) were hotly debated, in some cases without agreement; these still characterise the field until today (Leisering 2003).

Differences in underlying conceptions of the terms and ideas prevalent in national legislation and discourse seemed to be carried into the experts' views and the Governing Body. Ideational preferences as well as practical considerations were decisive factors in coming to at least provisional conclusions, which is for instance visible in the strong ILO influence regarding its preferential treatment of social insurance. At the same time, the transformation of the British's pragmatic stance, signified by the mere list of social services, to the more comprehensive project of the final *Survey* tells us that a knowledge production process in international bureaucracies can develop a life of its own. Several experts and Office members intervened, so that the final product did neither simply emerge out of a rational process, nor was controllable by a single actor.

Still, the deliberations furthered the demarcation of social services and laid the foundation for later studies, as well as for the invention of the concept of social security that only a few years later, during and after WWII, established itself in the ILO. 'Social security' was oriented on Roosevelt's 'New Deal' policies of the 1930s which are commonly attributed as originators of the term (Rodgers et al. 2009, 147). Especially the coupling of social assistance towards rights – though realised only in a limited way – expresses a foreshadowing of the later Philadelphia reconstitution of the ILO that similarly postulates a rights-based character of social security (ILO 1944). Nonetheless, it is not yet apparent that the *Survey* already overcame class-based politics and acknowledged social policy to be about the whole population, although at times its producers equated the protection of workers with the whole population, for instance when deciding upon the inclusion of social assistance (see e.g., ILO 1929a, 2).

#### 4.3 How to Compare: Observing Difference

Although the Correspondence Committee was critical of comparing countries' social services with a shared criterion, its report still discussed viable options. Instead of comparing total expenditures in respective local currencies with each other, ignoring their different foundations – which is actually what the final publication allows – the report proposed several ratios. Social charges (either the total borne by the national community, production, or a given industry) could be compared with an individual (per inhabitant or per worker), with the total amount of wages, or with national income or production. Since the manner in which social costs were distributed would vary by scheme, the experts found it preferable to take into account the whole amount of the costs, irrespective of who paid for them (ILO 1926c, 337, 414-5).

The Correspondence Committee nonetheless vigorously criticised comparisons, because the study would leave out individual initiative to cover risks as well as other social legislation that could not be quantified (such as hours of labour), and would thereby paint an incomplete picture of social costs. Even if



the study should be about the industries' ability to meet international competition, this would not merely depend on social charges, would vary from country to country and industry to industry, and a survey would not be able to determine its incidence.

More than that, the Correspondence Committee aimed at changing the perspective on 'social charges' entirely. The Correspondence Committee critically interpreted the British proposal as part of a political programme to reduce costs in light of high social expenditure. The experts argued that this perception had its origins in the economic consequences of WWI. Social expenditure would be in the focus especially because it seemed easiest to reduce out of all the costs of production, apart from wages (ILO 1926c, 409).

Its report strongly argued that rather than being a mere 'cost' on society or production, social policies provided multiple economic, financial, and social benefits, among them social stability, the improvement of health, and securing the workers' capacity to earn (ILO 1926c, 412-5).

Social insurance involves expense, but provides a quid pro quo (...). It is clearly impossible to evaluate this equivalent. The result therefore (...) is that the debit side is thrown into relief, while the credit side is passed over in silence. In the case of States where the system of social insurance is highly developed a considerable burden will be noted, whilst it will be impossible to set against it figures representing an equally considerable gain in respect of health and efficiency. (ILO 1926c, 412)

Obviously, having found their position in danger of losing credibility in the face of a unilaterally economic discourse, the experts tried to (re-)gain epistemic authority on this issue. However, they simultaneously admitted that such economic or social value would be difficult to quantify (different to monetary cost), which weakened their position and curtailed the possibilities of delivering a powerful counterargument (ILO 1926c, 412).

Although some critical voices in the GB similarly objected to the cost-based comparison, since it allowed illegitimate conclusions and could weaken the struggle for further social legislation (ILO 1926c, 339-41), more criticised the Committee's 'overstepping of boundaries', delivering an entirely 'philosophical' and normative treatise rather than discussing questions of method, as envisaged. The political nature of the deliberations becomes obvious, with, on the one hand, the Correspondence Committee pointing to the selectivity and politics of measuring and, on the other hand, the GB, preventing any further meeting of the Correspondence Committee, aiming to steer the issue back to questions of method and standardisation, overruling the critical voices. The further process of knowledge production did not anymore mention productive benefits. The final publication mentions it in its foreword, but does not further elaborate on it and thereby made it almost invisible, 'black-boxing' this controversially discussed subject (ILO 1933a, vii).

Asked about the ideas of the Correspondence Committee regarding comparisons, the Office debunked most as not meaningful. Others, such as the ratio of social services' cost to national income or production, were regarded as impossible to calculate due to missing data. Although the Committee on Social Charges criticised the Office's pessimism, it concluded that the final study should not include 'international comparison' and that readers should be warned to do so. Nonetheless and, as it turns out, correctly, they expressed the opinion that the future might bring the possibility of such a comparison (ILO 1931a, 127).

The case shows that possibilities of comparison were already imagined, but were seen as impossible to be realised, due to missing data. Notwithstanding, these were entirely based on costs, since the arguments for social policies' productive value were hampered by problems of measurability and could not gain currency in the organisation. The struggles are obviously linked to political arguments pro or against social policy, with debates around possibilities of comparison intermingled with issues of value of social policy.

#### 4.4 The *International Survey of Social Services*: Little Quantification, no Indicator

Despite the fact that many participant countries of the *Survey* in the interwar period had the means to produce, or already possessed, advanced statistics of their respective schemes, the *Survey* did not include much numerical information, except on general data of the population and cost-based scheme statistics. The final *Survey* did neither present, nor reflect upon comparisons, and experts and Office staff – led by ideas of exactitude and comprehensiveness – argued against doing comparative studies. At the same time, the debates show that indicators were debated, yet finally not realised due to several missing prerequisites of comparison.

For an indicator of performance or quality of social services, a unifying concept of social services is needed that satisfies two conditions: normative and cognitive integration. The degree of integration can vary, but the units forming part of the category 'social services' at least have to be viewed as being basically the same, so that an indicator can evaluate their differences. This equates to a common theory or concept that could guide an evaluation.

In how far did the *Survey* or their producers draw on normative aspects that the measured phenomenon ('social services') shares? Discussions around social policies in the diverse expert committees and the Governing Body show multiple, sometimes conflicting social political ideas and norms that prohibit a clear hegemonic position of one or the other concept which would have facilitated comparability. Social policies have always relied on a multiplicity of ideological traditions, among them social democracy, liberalism, and social conservatism, as most abstract social ideas (Leisering 2009, 578). Even today, the 'so-

cial' is only vaguely defined. Not only vague normative underpinnings of the field itself, but also the fact that this multiplicity has been carried into the ILO, due to tripartism, made an agreement on common grounds of comparison unlikely. The later concept of social security on the other hand was based on a normative integration; social insurance and social assistance were bound to the state's responsibility for individual security, although what this concretely means is mostly still uncertain and interpretation-dependent. Social security nonetheless came to be the guiding concept of the welfare state (Kaufmann 2015, 265-94).

'Social services' on the other hand, as utilised in the *Survey*, combines social insurance as well as social assistance under a risk-based concept, but already marginalises the latter, by making its inclusion dependent on criteria prescribed by social insurance, such as its worker orientation. Additionally, it merely refers to institutions and thus does not produce unity on a normative level. Social assistance did not mobilise a strong lobby in the ILO. Nonetheless, the *Survey* did include both forms of social services, and as such might have contributed to the perception of a common horizon in cognitive terms, by surveying national systems of social services. Although such a common horizon might have already been available in political imaginations of the time (Conrad 1996, 156-8), the communication of comparisons to the public has its own effect, as Heintz (2010, 167) argues. New social policies in one country could now be implemented in the light of old policies in others, policies from one end of the world could be compared with those at the other end (see for the relevance of a common horizon in social policy Berten and Leisering 2017). The integration of both social insurance and social assistance under the common rubric of 'social services' based on a rights-based notion is, as has been shown, an early indication of the later move towards the introduction of the 'social security' concept.

Although 'productive' benefits of social policies were discussed by the Correspondence Committee, the GB actively put an end to the debate, effectively circumventing an agreement on these fundamentally normative questions. As can be seen from the reconstruction of the main lines of debate, especially employers' representatives argued for comparisons on cost, based on widespread ideas of social services as a large factor in the costs of production. Some government representatives that similarly argued for the reduction of public costs or were on the side of the employers approved of such an interpretation, whereas workers' representatives and more social democratic-leaning government representatives found themselves on the other side, but regretfully conceded that the productive dimension of social policy defied quantification (ILO 1926c, 337-9). In the end, no unifying order of worth was decided upon.

In the interwar years, there was also no alternative hegemonic indicator that could function as rally point for the opposition. GDP had started its triumph in global politics and development only after WWII, and there was no movement

against it, comparable, for instance, to the 1960s and 1970s social indicator movement which only emerged in opposition to widespread economic hegemony in statistics, or the Human Development Index (HDI), developed as a more inclusive alternative to GDP as measurement of a society's progress (see also [Lepenies 2019](#), in this issue). Neither was there an organisation that took up the task, as key proponent, of developing social service indicators, nor a discourse based on the idea of constant progress monitoring such as the one on evidence-based policy-making and New Public Management and its constant drive to assessing policies' quality and performance, that would have propelled indicator development.

As a matter of fact, similar problems would accompany the ILO much later, in the early 2000s. As an attempt to operationalise the concept of Decent Work that then Director-General Somavia circulated from the late 1990s on, the ILO's *Socio-Economic Security Programme* developed a measurement of socio-economic security of individuals and countries (ILO 2004). Its report included country rankings in which mainly Western industrialised countries were top-rated. Developing countries and employers' representatives fiercely criticised the report – the former because it superimposed standardised criteria of performance without considering the different national economic conditions; the latter because they feared similar rankings of enterprises. After the *Programme* was virtually closed down (Maier-Rigaud 2009, 170), further attempts at quantifying Decent Work ultimately led to a set of indicators still in need of further elaboration (ILO 2013b), but even in its most recent monitoring report the ILO shies away from strict country rankings based on more than information-based indicators that have a more depoliticised image (ILO 2017; Berten and Leisering 2017, 157).

The final statistics of cost included in the Survey show income and expenditure of the respective schemes in the form of a two-column table. On the side of income, contributions are listed (contributing insured, employers, public subsidies), as well as revenue from investments and other sources of income; on the side of expenditure, cash and in-kind benefits are listed, among administrative expenses and other expenditure. For social assistance schemes, a similar table is presented, showing on the income side state subsidies, subsidies from departments, communes etc., contributions from persons assisted or their families, revenue from investments and other income, and on the expenditure side cash and in-kind benefits, costs of administration and other expenses (ILO 1933a, xvii-i). Enabling a comparison between the total income and total expenditure, schemes can be evaluated as to their own economic efficiency. Accordingly, the statistics show that the desired state is self-sufficiency of each scheme, and an economic benchmark functions as structuring model. This obviously is consequential for the grounds on which social policies are and can be evaluated.

Although not an indicator per se, the cost statistics included in the *Survey* could be considered a provisional indicator. Without being based on a common metric and thereby not inherently comparable, the statistics of cost could be transformed to a ratio-based indicator fairly easily, if data was available, by regarding both sides of the table (or one) and following one of the suggestions of relating said figures to other statistics, described above. Later widely used social security indicators such as public social expenditure as a percentage of GDP function similarly (ILO 2017, 203-4).

According to the Office, all the warnings about international comparison did not prevent reactions that presented the *Survey* as contributing to ‘studies on the comparative cost of social services’, while at other times the non-comparative nature of the Office’s publication was understood but criticised (ILO 1937, 6). The experts were aware of the danger and advised against comparative tables, focusing on the mere presentation of ‘facts’, but this way just dodged value statements themselves. The cost data – not relatives, but absolutes – were missing an accompanying theory that would have made sense of them. Although the *Survey* abstained from directly comparing countries’ social policies, putting costs in the centre and arranging information in a two-column table, observers could conduct comparative evaluations themselves, based on their own ideas of quality and value and use the numbers for illustration. In an already prevalent discourse that devalues the costs imposed on production (ILO 1925, 61-2), a juxtaposition of income and expenditure without adding information on the productive dimension assigns higher value to those schemes that incur less costs (in relation to the wages, for instance), even if this is not explicitly postulated. Of course, the foundation of such evaluations is entirely discursive in nature and not clearly suggested by the data. Since the information is not presupposing any specific utilisation, it is highly unpredictable how it is made relevant in policy-making (Lehtonen 2015, 80).

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## 5. Conclusion

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In this article, I identified and scrutinised the conditions and decisions leading to a shared cognitive framework in the form of the *Survey*, i.e., the work necessary for its production, and the reasons for the inclusion of little quantified data and a mere provisional indicator of cost. Since the *Survey* was the foundation for later studies such as *The Cost of Social Security*, it had a pioneering character and became a reference point in its conclusions and interpretations of the ‘social’ (ISSA 1955, 9-13). It introduced the question of comparability in social policy, having dealt for the first time from a globally comparative standpoint with issues of value and the relevance of ‘cost’ of social policies and provides an illustration of the perceived possibilities and hindrances of comparison in

this field that would in many respects accompany the ILO for the years to come.

By scrutinising the conditions of production of the *Survey*, we can see how these influence the kinds of knowledge that are provided (similarly Davis et al. 2012, 4). The *Survey* was produced following a proposal by the British government that had quite specific interests attached to it. It is also obvious that contemporary discourses have had their influence in the production in the first place, namely the idea of reducing public expenditure and the costs of production. Yet not only did the initial proposal change, the process of knowledge production also shows difficulties of organisational steering throughout. Expert committees and the Office through their rules of work and standards of comprehensiveness, and more concretely their ability to decide on the inclusion or exclusion of schemes and scheme types, had a considerable influence in the resulting *Survey*, nonetheless mediated by the Governing Body which more than once exercised its veto power when it did not appreciate their work, especially visible in the negative reactions to the Correspondence Committee's first and only report. The Governing Body even put in place a committee of its own to assist the work on the *Survey*, which more explicitly consolidated its influence over the production process. Notwithstanding, the process – by not being limited to a unitary actor – developed a life of its own. It is observable that the different constituents of the ILO occupied different positions based on their political leanings, though the debates never erupted into open political conflict. More technical statements merged with those regarding value and normative ideas.

Debates concentrated around the ways social policy could be further defined and the possibilities of comparison, but did not engage with the actual information. This is not surprising when recalling the way the organisation went about the *Survey*'s production. Data and information came from state administrations, so the ILO could rely on the legitimacy of state measurements and official counts. The organisation, including the Office, 'merely' decided upon the way it would arrange this information into categories and standardise these into a common frame – a consequential process nonetheless.

How can we explain the unilaterally cost-based statistics of social services in the *Survey* that most closely match the format of an indicator of expenditure? Interestingly, the problems with developing alternatives to the cost-based statistics resemble later struggles formulated during the social indicator movement. As this movement's origin was a critique of exclusively economically-understood and -defined problems and phenomena instead of 'social' ones (with 'social' defined here essentially in opposition to 'economic'), it aimed at developing alternative social indicators, such as of 'quality of life', in opposition to economic growth as indicator of development, progress and general quality of a society. Apart from problems of comparability stemming from wide-ranging differences in cultural and social traditions across the globe that

would all impact the interpretation of such indicators, the problem is that economic indicators already contain a common denominator: monetary units. This common denominator solves the problem of comparison, or in other words: commensuration of qualities is achieved through the fiction of objective prices, comparable across divisions, such as enterprises or societies (see also Kaufmann 1974, 204). The productive dimension of social services could not resort to an already established common denominator. In the case of the *Survey*, of course, the cost data was not made comparable in full; comparison was impeded by not choosing to equalise monetary units through translating them into a shared framework, though it was not made impossible for the observer to do so, either.

The descriptive approach to cost though did not sufficiently take account of the relevance of theories underlying measurements and data presentation. Although ILO staff and experts did try to fall back to simply ‘present the facts’, every measurement and presentation of data is a decision regarding what is deemed relevant, and has repercussions. The final publication should thus not be seen as a mere representation of social policies, but as an active intervention, mediated by politics and expert decisions. At the time of the publication of the *Survey*, implicit interpretations stemming from common theories of the economic and the social, for instance regarding the value of social services, could get utilised to interpret the cost data. By not reflecting sufficiently upon their existence and delivering alternative interpretations, observers could be guided by their own theory regarding the explanation of the information and cause-effect relations. In fact, this was one of the central elements missing to produce a ‘real’ indicator: an accompanying theory or concept that the data would be related to that was not directly measurable itself and could more distinctly direct the interpretation of the data in specific ways.

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